

THE
ORCHARDS
OF SYON



GEOFFREY HILL

COUNTRY & FOLK

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The fourth book of poems by Geoffrey Hill to appear since 1996, this is the final installment of the remarkable series that began with *Canaan* and continued with *The Triumph of Love and Speech!* *Speech!* Read together, these four books -- each a distinct and complete aesthetic achievement -- form a single great poem, a kind of high-modernist Divine Comedy that is at once a prophetic judgment on man's fallen state and a sad and angry consolation. *The Orchards of Syon* is Hill's *Paradiso*, a Dantean eclogue in which the natural world, and the dream-state of our earthly existence, offer glimpses into Paradise. Having cut us to the quick in his previous books, Hill now heals us with the balm of his own language, and in doing so remakes the devotional poem for our times.

The Orchards of Syon Details

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Mike says

In parts too long, too short, too obscure, too overwrought, too obtuse, too yearning, too old-fashioned but always too much and never not enough, this book to me sums up better than any other what Hill's poetry is all about. Published the same year as Jorie Graham's equally-powerful *Never*, it has to stand as one of its decade's greatest volumes of poetry in the English language. Hill restores to the canon via these orchards the valid need for poetry to be "about" greater things instead of being about people or one's self. Sure, other poets—many other poets—still write about a morning's chill or an old woman they always see at the post office, but Hill approaches each and every topic with a real attention to wordcraft: his works bespeak his efforts, and stand out as what laymen expect of poetry—to be poetic, stately, even verbose. His poems look even in simple serif font like calligraphy due to his skill and choice of words. For as historical as the poems are—many concern the England of Hill's childhood—they are also modern and nearly comforting, tonic, in what they offer in way of insight germane to our world today.

Steve says

I think Hill is one of the great poets of our time, but that is based mostly on everything up through his collection *Canaan*. Since then, I wasn't sure how to take Hill 2.0. His preceding work often used rhyme (not important to me), but possessed a somber and prophetic density (important to me) that moved his work well beyond most of what is being written today. Then the new and confessional stuff started. I think I've finally accepted this shift, in part because I've finally settled on a way to read him (2.0 version, that is). In the past I would work slowly through the new stuff, looking up allusions, which was like pulling up weeds with tweezers -- one at a time. There was no enjoyment. Now, I just go with it. If you're reasonably well read, you will pick up on the main threads (which you will probably have to still look up) and see where he's going.

Orchard of Syon is a trippy affair. If this collection was a movie, you would think it was directed by Luis Buñuel. Hill informs the reader immediately that Life is but a dream, and Hill's dream is one that is a wildly ranging dialogue with an ever shifting You (God, dead poets, etc.). It's the dialogue part of this that you need to get -- which is meant to recall a Middle English translation of Catherine of Sienna's *Dialogo*, titled *Orchard of Syon* (I looked this up). The other reference that keeps cropping up is "Goldengrove" -- which is from Hopkin's poem "Spring and Fall." Of course (the Christian) Hill puns away with "Fall," but wordplay — theological and non-theological -- abounds in *Syon*. There are numerous funny lines in *Syon*, where Hill often pokes fun at himself, which is quite a shift from his heavy reputation. Oh, History, in all of its savagery is always present, but Hill's ongoing dialogue comes across as a very humane response -- the only response. Imagine Job being done by Falstaff. Since this was an initial reading, I probably have a lot of the above wrong. It will take several readings to peel back the layers of *Syon*, but I can now at least say that I might enjoy that effort.

Joshua says

Old English poet is mad about the sad state of Home

J D Murray says

Ah, Geoffrey Hill, your reputation precedes you. Dense, theological, fearlessly difficult, oftentimes surpassing mortal comprehension- maybe a bit pretentious?

But not always incomprehensible. It helps if you don't torture yourself over the obscure allusions and let the words wash over you, but then that will help with anything labelled "difficult" in your head, at least on a first reading. And I always did care more about what I meant by *The Waste Land* than what Eliot meant by it.

And not without passages of tremendous beauty:

"After that shadowy, thrashing midsummer hail-storm, Earth lay for a while, the ghost-bride of livid Thor, butcher of strawberries, and the shire-tree dripped red in the arena of its uprooting."

That's from *Mercian Hymns*, not *Orchards of Syon*, but you get the idea. If you read poetry for the poetry, the sense ought to take care of itself.

Rereading is required. But he's not unrewarding, either.

Will says

Like the best of Hill's long poems, *Syon* (unfortunately) starts out densely allusive and hermeneutical but gradually lets up into something vaguely comprehensible. Here, it's an elegy for twentieth century poetry. For Hill that's Mandelstam, Celan, Pavese, Ingeborg Bachmann, Montale, Hopkins, Lawrence, and Frank O'Hara. Hill name-drops them all repeatedly, and there're some cute moments when he calls D.H. Lawrence "Bert." If I hadn't previously read and loved his early *Mercian Hymns* and late masterpiece *The Triumph of Love*, I'd probably be intolerant of this sort of thing, and those two works are much better introductions to Hill than this.
